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SUBJECT: ROK PLANS TO UPGRADE RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

Classified By: Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4(b/d)

11. (C) Summary: MOFAT's European Affairs DG Kim Eun-joong asked for a meeting with POL M/C on September 25 to discuss the status of negotiations with Russia over the joint statement to be announced by Presidents Lee and Medvedev in connection with their summit next week. In particular, DG Kim wanted to give the Embassy a heads up about the use of the phrase "strategic cooperative partnership" in describing Korea-Russia ties -- an upgrade from the current "mutually trustful comprehensive partnership." Kim noted that the ROK had also used the same formulation in upgrading its relations with China earlier this year. DG Kim said that the joint statement negotiations with Russia had been very painful, but the ROK side had been successful in deleting most phrases that were inconsistent with Seoul's world views, such as "multipolarity," "arms race," and "dividing line in East Asia." Also quite difficult was coming to terms on appropriate language on Russia joining the WTO and the situation in Georgia. The joint statement negotiations were not finished yet, but, Kim said, the ROK side was very mindful of the need to stick to the world views represented by other responsible market-oriented democracies. End Summary.

Korea-Russia Summit

12. (C) MOFAT European Affairs Bureau Director-General Kim Eun-joong told poloffs that he had delayed his flight out of Seoul in order to apprise the U.S. Embassy of the status of negotiations on the joint statement that Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Dmitri Medvedev will announce next week in Moscow. The summit with Medvedev will take place in Moscow on September 29 and will be followed by a press release. DG Kim said the two Presidents would discuss North Korea, but that issue would not be included in the joint statement. After the summit, President Lee will fly to St. Petersburg where he will address university students. Noting that Lee would only spend two nights in Russia, DG Kim said that there is a military parade in Seoul on October 1 (the ROK Armed Forces Day) -- the first in 15 years -- so the President had to get back for that.

Upgrading the Relationship

13. (C) DG Kim said the negotiations with Russia over the joint statement had been very difficult, and there were still 10 issues pending. The text of the statement was in Korean and in Russian, but Kim promised to provide the Embassy with an English version as soon as it was finalized. MOFAT seemed

most concerned that the decision to upgrade the Korea-Russia relationship to one of "strategic cooperative partnership" would give Washington heartburn. He assured poloffs that this description was intended to emphasize the strengthening bilateral ties in trade issues and economic cooperation -- especially on energy issues. Kim explained that Korea has had a "mutually trustful comprehensive partnership" with Russia since 2004, but the two Presidents agreed to upgrade the relationship in July in light of Korea's recent decision to upgrade its relationship with China using similar terms. Kim said the description of the relationship was originally intended to be stronger, such as "strategic partnership," but the ROKG backtracked due to Russia's actions in Georgia.

Points of Contention

14. (C) DG Kim said that the Korean Government had successfully argued for the exclusion of certain phrases that the ROKG deemed inconsistent with its "international standard." These included "multipolarity," "arms race," and "a dividing line in East Asia," all of which the Russians included in their original text. Following are other key issues still being debated.

-- Kim said that Russia had originally wanted to include text in the joint statement that referred to the need to settle issues in "Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia" through dialogue. Korea, however, insisted that the text refer only generally to Georgia.

-- Korea also asked that Russian references to complying with multilateral diplomatic efforts de-emphasize the "complying."

-- Korea included language that said Seoul welcomes Russia's hope to join the WTO and that the procedure should begin in due course, the latter clause had not, Kim said, made the Russians happy, especially as the ROK had already agreed bilaterally to support Russia's accession.

-- The joint statement would also acknowledge the importance of the construction of the Khasan-Najin rail link, currently being undertaken by Russia and North Korea. This link was important to Korean companies because it would cut shipping time to Europe in half. Consequently, Kim said, Korea is hoping to buy 40 percent of Russia's share in the project.

Comment

15. (C) South Korea's relations with Russia have evolved substantially since diplomatic relations were normalized in 1991. Russia is now a significant South Korean trading partner; more than that, many Koreans are increasingly seeking resources -- oil, metals, timber and fish -- from the Soviet Far East. Politically, South Koreans remain quite sensitive to Moscow's role in all regional security issues, especially the Six Party Talks. This is President Lee's first visit to Moscow; his predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun, was in Moscow three years ago; in 2001, Russian President Putin visited Seoul.
STEPHENS